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CIA's Blunders in Viet Nam

Developments Show Folly of Letting Intelligence Agency Establish Policies

As the war in Viet Nam has continued, the struggle in Washington between rival groups inside the administration has grown in bitterness and intensity. There have been angry mutterings of resignation—not carried out in practice—and high words about drift and danger. Part of the tension has been caused by clashes in temperament but the central problem arises from differences over public policy.

By the middle of April, or even a few days earlier, it seemed clear to a few discerning officials in the State Department that the military struggle had begun to turn, yet decisively against the Communist forces.

This basic military fact has been obscured by the later political storms but the available evidence confirms this trend. Only about 10 per cent of the Communist forces, which number somewhat less than 25,000 men, comes from outside Viet Nam.

This background deserves considerable emphasis for it shows that the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency are entitled to blame for this limited achievement. As the war dragged on, however, it became painfully evident that both of them were guilty of shambling inaccuracy in reading the political situation in Viet Nam.

When the debate behind the scenes is made public years from now, no one will

be able to deny that the State Department, on the basis of papers and recommendations written at the time and not with the wisdom of hindsight, had a far greater insight into the true situation in Viet Nam than any other agency in the American government. Yet the State Department has faced a desperate and wearying struggle to get its view embodied in American policy.

If the final result in Viet Nam should be a defeat for the cause supported by American arms and American money, there will be a rush in this country to place the blame on the most vulnerable scapegoats. What is an easier target than the State Department?

It will be said that the State Department lost South Viet Nam just as it once lost China. That charge is wrong about China, and it certainly never can be true about Viet Nam.

The record will show that the State Department from the very beginning saw the tragic significance of the Diem government's attack on the students. It understood the moral decay and political cruelty that prompted the campaign against the Buddhists. It regretted the timid, blundering and inconsistent appeal made to the army in Viet Nam to assert its independence.

It argues now that if it is hard to find an alternative to the Diem group, the blame rests in no small part on the unfortunate alliance between

the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department, with its disastrous impact in recent weeks on American policy.

In this distribution of blame, the heaviest burden falls on the CIA. The officials making these criticisms are not vindictive, nor do they have any desire to stir up a row inside the administration.

With the evidence in their hands of the incredible and garish blunders committed in a sickening sequence by the CIA, these men in the State Department would be false to their trust if they remained silent while omens of disaster steadily accumulated.

The wretched muddle in Viet Nam shows the folly and the danger of allowing the CIA to be a primary force in the development of American policy. The CIA should be an instrument for carrying out an agreed policy; it should never be the architect of policy.

Two further points should be made:

First, Ambassador Lodge, by consent of those best able to judge, is doing a first-rate job in very hard conditions.

Secondly, the action of Senator Church and some 30 other Senators in threatening to cut off aid is designed to strengthen President Kennedy in his dealings with the Diem government. It arms President Kennedy with a lever against that government if it resists necessary reforms in Viet Nam or if it flirts with a danger of neutrality.

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